

a little sugar in my bowl, a little sweetness down in my soul

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by [arcticmonks](#)

Summary

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Chapter 1

After four shifts in a row where the other staff give her a very wide, very lonely berth, it's Santos who calls Samira out on her newfound prickliness with a characteristically brusque question lobbed her way by the computers on Thursday: "So did your cat die or something?"

"I don't have a cat."

"Like, you never did, or you did and now you don't and you're taking it out on us?" Whitaker, in his third change of scrubs of the day, nudges Santos' shoulder. "*What?* It's true, she's pissed about something, I just wanna know what."

"Maybe don't piss her off more," Javadi mutters, barely audible under the sound of her fingers typing away.

Samira, deciding to be *nice* and not play into their claims that she's mad about something, bites her tongue. She tries her hardest.

Until a minute of tense silence passes. Perlah sucks her teeth and starts talking to Princess, words Samira can't understand but she *knows* are about her, and she explodes.

"It's none of your business," she starts, and even Langdon coming out of Central 10 stops to listen, "but if you *have* to know, I'm *pissed* because I'm having the week from hell trying to find someone to take to my stupid, overly competitive cousin's wedding before tomorrow, and I put off trying to find the plus one I RSVP'd for, and none of my Hinge dates have gone even remotely well, but my *entire* family thinks I have a boyfriend and if I don't bring a boyfriend with me to the 'weekend of celebration at a resort and spa in beautiful Nantucket'," her hands go up on their own to air-quote the words from the off-white, tastefully thick invitation that she knows Kashi had slaved over like she was Patrick Bateman, "I'll be branded the old maid cousin forever even though I'm only twenty eight, and everyone will laugh at me for the rest of my life," her voice has risen to a level she didn't know it could get to, but you learn something new every day, "and it won't matter if I'm a doctor or if I have a very expensive apartment and no roommates in downtown Pittsburgh or if I've finally struck up a good relationship with the girl who sells honey at the farmers market and now gives me a discount, because if I show up to this wedding without a boyfriend, I'll be a loser." She finally takes a breath, moving her hands wildly in the air to punctuate her next

statement: “But it’s none of your business anyway!”

The embarrassment hits her as soon as she’s done speaking, skin turning into the surface of the sun under everyone’s gaze. Everyone. Including Dana, looking over her glasses, low on her nose, with a kindness Samira’s not sure she deserves after disrupting the floor so badly that a couple patients who can walk actually have gotten up from their beds and are poking their heads out to gape at her, too.

“I’ll date ya, Spinster, even though I don’t normally swing that way,” says Myrna in her raspy voice with a wink, fucking Myrna in her handcuffs, who has christened her with a new nickname that will absolutely replace Slow-Mo in the minds of every single ER staffer for the rest of all time. This story will get told over and over again. Even when she’s moved on, even when she’s in the ground, the employees of the Pitt will still talk about Dr. Spinster Mohan.

There’s laughs and giggles all around, but she gets the sense that it’s more at Myrna’s offer than at her outburst. That’s a relief, at least. She grimaces as she makes eye contact with McKay, her face sympathetic as she shrugs. They’ve grabbed drinks a couple times, and Samira remembers that McKay had told her that she’s focusing on her kid and work. “There’s nothing wrong with being single!” McKay had exclaimed, exasperated, right before she’d gotten a few free drinks out of the sucker next to them at the bar who thought he’d had a chance of changing her mind.

Abbot’s voice is loud and curt, cutting through the chatter easily, while he steps out from the office. “What’s going on out here? Do we not have enough patients to treat?”

Dana, mercifully, agrees. She gives a *shooing* motion. “You all heard Dr. Abbot, let’s get back to it.”

The rest of the shift goes fine. Perfectly fine. As she’s working with the next few patients (broken leg, UTI, baby with a fever), no one else says anything, though she does get a kind little smile from Jesse that says that he heard what happened but he doesn’t care. Too bad he’s gay. He’s kind and can actually hold a conversation, and that salt and pepper hair is —

“Dr. Mohan,” Abbot calls from somewhere behind her as she’s finishing up her last chart before she hands off to the night shift. “Come see me before you clock out.”

“Sure,” she replies without looking. She’s not worried, not really.

Abbot's exceedingly fair in his feedback, even if he's been challenging her more than she's used to while he's been covering for Robby today. After she takes her bag from her locker and hoists it onto her shoulder, she heads toward the office; Abbot comes out and directs her towards the stairwell.

Instead of commending her on her early-morning LP like she hopes for — she knows he'd seen it, had caught his eye and two inspiring thumbs up through the glass of Trauma 1 — he asks, "What color are you wearing?"

Samira looks down at her scrubs and wonders if he's been colorblind all along, a detail that's escaped her notice. "Uh, blue?"

"For the wedding."

"For the wedding."

They both look at each other, Samira more blankly and confusedly, for a beat. Abbot raises his eyebrows, patient for a moment more, before he says, "The wedding that you told everyone about two hours ago."

Right when she thinks that she's made her peace with everyone in her family and at work thinking that she's going to die alone, Abbot makes her feel warm under her collar about it. "I recognize that sharing anything about that was a lapse in judgment that detracted focus from the critical work that we do to help our patients."

He scoffs. He really, actually scoffs. "Save that shit for Robby. You did great work today. I'm asking because I have the weekend off."

Maybe all the stress has been getting to her (it has; she feels her eyelids wanting to twitch), but what he's saying isn't making sense. "So do I."

"Dr. Mohan," Abbot says, one corner of his lips moving just slightly upward as he crosses his arms against his chest, "If nothing has changed since your announcement, then you're still looking for a date for your cousin's wedding. I have the next three days off. I've been told, once or twice, that I'm a great wedding date. And I have a few different suits for different dress codes and ties in various colors."

"But —"

"You can say no —"

“Why?”

His careful eyes find hers in that sort of disconcerting way he always makes eye contact whenever they talk to each other. “I really like wedding buffet food, and I don’t like my residents to feel like they’re losers.”

“It’s an entire weekend with people you don’t know.”

“I know you.”

“We’d have to pretend,” her voice falters before she rights it, “that we’re dating. At the bachelorette party a couple weeks ago, I told them that I’d be bringing my boyfriend as my plus one.”

“I took an acting class or two in college. I think I can manage.”

Abbot stares at her while she tries to think of a response. His offer is better than Myrna’s, but she still can’t believe he’s serious. “I really can’t ask you to do this.”

“Well,” he says, “it’s a good thing I’m doing the asking.”

Samira’s mouth twists on its own while he keeps staring at her. She’s usually not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but ... “Are you sure?”

“If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

She slips her phone out of her back pocket, opens up her contacts app and extends it out to him. “I don’t have your number. And my dress is pink.”

*

Their plane leaves at noon the next day. He meets her before TSA, and they stand there with their bags for a second, not knowing how to greet each other, before she reaches for a hug. His hands on her lower back are warm, even through the fabric of her sweatshirt.

“Is this okay?” he asks directly into her ear.

“Oh, uh,” Samira answers, her eyes widening as she tilts her face into his shoulder, “this is okay. Good that we’re getting started with ...” She trails off, not sure how to phrase it in a way that doesn’t scream *he’s an attending and I’m a resident and we’re going to a wedding under the ruse that we’re dating and we have to look like we’ve been dating.*

“The physical side of things?”

He pulls back enough to be able to see her face as she murmurs, imagination wandering to places it really shouldn't go, “Yeah, that part.”

He lets her go, then. The line to check their respective bags is short enough that they don't have to wait too long, and they make their way to the front of the security line without a problem. The next available agent checking IDs beckons them up gruffly.

“Passports,” the agent says in the tone of voice that says she's had a bad day and that they better not make it worse. “You two together?”

Samira hesitates on what *together* means to the United States Department of Homeland Security, but Abbot smiles slyly and replies, “Sure are.”

It satisfies the agent, who takes their passports, scans them and waves them onto the conveyor belts with weariness. In the process of taking their shoes off, Samira grasps onto the nearest available object, which happens to be his — Dr. Abbot's — Jack's — what the hell does she even call him now that they're doing this? — forearm. His very taut, muscular, veiny forearm. Has he always had those?

Jack, she settles on Jack, offers to stop for something on their way to the gate. “Couple diners, or we could go to a bar, or Starbucks,” he says, while he looks at the map on the terminal wall. When he mentions Jimmy John's next, his stomach audibly grumbles, making her laugh.

She looks at the map too and identifies what might just be the holy grail. “TGIF.”

“I had no idea you felt so strongly about days of the week,” he comments while he follows her, just a step or two behind.

“I don't, but I do want some of the worst mozzarella sticks in the world,” she replies, shrugging a little — there had been a TGIF a couple blocks from the main building back in med school that everyone had frequented, watered-down cocktails be damned — before they get to the host, who gives them a table for two in the otherwise near-deserted restaurant.

They have plenty of time before boarding starts, so they put in their orders for drinks and appetizers and let the kind, pimply server

stumble over his words as he says he'll come back for their entree orders. Jack takes a pan-seared potsticker, dips it into the zhuzhed up soy sauce, takes a bite and asks how they met.

"At work," Samira replies, "obviously. How else would we meet?"

"Any of the ways people meet," Jack says.

"But we met at work. You didn't, I don't know, drive me from Chicago to New York the summer after graduation."

Jack leans back in his seat, enough for her to watch him deliberately wipe his sticky hands on his napkin. He'll reach for the hand sanitizer in his bag soon enough, the same as she will when she's done with her condensation-sweaty Long Island iced tea. "*When Harry Met Sally*," he says. "Good movie."

Because they're not at work and they have time to chitchat, she doesn't feel too bad about quizzing him, "And we didn't meet on a train to Vienna."

"Hmm — ah — the one with Ethan Hunt?"

"*Before Sunrise*, with Ethan Hawke," she corrects, trying not to laugh. He's forty-whatever and definitely not what she'd immediately call a rom-com type; he can't help his limited knowledge in comparison to her admittedly deep bank of rom-com meet-cutes. "And you didn't call into a radio relationship expert and tell the entire nation that you're a sad, handsome widower."

"That one's *Sleepless in Seattle*. Meg Ryan, right?"

His voice doesn't break or anything; he doesn't show any signs that she'd forgotten about the ring on his finger. But, realizing her mistake, she meets his eye on purpose and says, "Sorry."

He waves one hand somewhat dismissively. "It's alright. It's been a long time since anyone described me that way."

"That way, like, sad?"

"Yup," Jack says, a sardonic lilt to the word. "My therapist said I'm 'working through my tragedies,' which feels a lot like 'sad, but functioning sad'."

Samira's fascinated, probably too much, by his admission. He has a

therapist. They worked on things together. People don't usually call him sad. Mysterious, maybe; she's asked him on plenty of different occasions where he'd learned a technique and he'd responded with "med school" or "war" or, once, "Psych 2 on a Tuesday." If she presses, he'll give the procedure to her with him supervising, calm but firm, from a couple feet away, but he won't give her a proper answer. If this is going to work, she has to get to know him enough to be able to convincingly act like she *knows* him.

"How long were you together?"

"Three years, altogether. Love at first sight, and we got married after five months."

"How long ago ...?"

"... did she die? It's alright to ask. You're working up a patient history." She bites her tongue to stop herself from saying that she's never been as interested in a patient as she's interested in him — where did *that* come from? — and instead lets him keep going. "It's been twenty one years. Car accident. I was in Afghanistan." There's a detached quality to his voice, like he's said the words enough times to not have to think about them, like they're not raw anymore. It makes her heart hurt.

"I'm sorry."

"It's ..." His gaze drops down to the plate in front of him. "It's been a long time. It's not alright, but the grief never gets smaller, your life grows around it."

She doesn't say anything for a moment, but admits, softly, "I guess it does. It took work to feel like it was okay to grow, to have something good happening in my life."

"Your dad, right?"

Samira nods, takes another sip of her drink, reaches for a lukewarm mozzarella stick with a disappointing cheese pull. She doesn't cry anymore just thinking about it, but sometimes when she's having a frank conversation and it comes up, she feels her throat try to tighten up. Now's one of those times. "Yeah. Fifteen years."

Jack nods, meets her eyes. "Sorry."

The server picks that moment to come back for their entree orders.

She gets the chicken tenders, objectively one of the safest options in the menu, and he orders a burger. The kid goes off, and they pick at their food for a minute or two before Jack asks, “So — the stupid, overly competitive cousin. Which side of the family is she?”

Samira snorts. God. He’d really listened to that whole rant. It feels like a million years away, even though it’d been less than 24 hours ago. “Kashi. Dad’s side. Everyone there is from his side, and it’s important to me that ...” *that they know I’ve made a life for myself that Dad would be proud of.* “That they think this is real,” she says quickly instead.

Jack nods, like *go on*. “What do I need to know about her?”

She doesn’t know exactly where to start, so she just rambles. “My dad and her dad, my Uncle Jay, were brothers. He’s an architect, she followed in his footsteps. She’s my age, and our moms were — are still, I guess — pretty close, so we grew up together. Like, we shared clothes when we were toddlers, we went to the same schools, everything. Our houses were right down the block from each other. We grew up in Boston, Back Bay, don’t know if you’re familiar with it. She has two younger brothers, Indy, Indra, technically but he really liked Harrison Ford a lot when we were kids, he’s four years younger, and Ravi, who’s twelve years younger than us. Kashi was always just a little better than me at most things, and she always liked to ... I don’t know, lord it over me? English, social studies, math. By the time we were in high school, she’d sort of made it her goal to outdo me. Or, that’s what it felt like. And this was right after my dad had died, so it was just ...”

“Not a good time.”

“Exactly.” She looks up from where she’s been swirling her straw in circles around her nearly-empty glass, lifts her shoulders in a shrug. “We went to the same college, if you can believe it —”

“Cornell,” Jack says.

“Yeah — how? —”

“It was in your file.”

Right. He’s read her file. “Cornell. Kashi made a point of doing all the cool things, but better than me. If I made a good connection with a professor in my department, she’d become best friends with the chair of her own department. If I got into a selective club, she’d somehow manage to become the best friend of the entire executive board. If I

went to a frat party —”

Jack snickers. “You went to frat parties?”

“Hey,” she replies quickly, feeling her cheeks heat, “it was — they were — everyone went! Like, everyone, okay,” and behind her eyelids flash memories of the thrill of Delta Chi guys eyeing her up in cramped basements with neon lights, “and they were fun. The point is that if I got invited to a frat party, she’d already be there with her tongue down the president’s throat.”

He coughs, covering his mouth with the side of his fist, but she can tell he’s just trying to disguise more laughter. “Okay, I think I get it. What about her fiancé?”

“Hayden. He’s a civil engineer, they worked at the same company while she was doing an internship or something. He’s really something.”

“In your opinion?”

“In everyone’s opinion.” It comes out almost wistful.

“Mhm,” Jack says, consideringly, but there’s still a laugh in his eyes. Not at her, but with her, like he’s commiserating with her. It feels leaps and bounds better than the reactions she’d got from her Hinge dates this week. As she’d explained the situation to try to suss out if she could be around them for the entire wedding weekend, each and every encounter had felt a little like torture; on top of what she assumed would be torture from Kashi and everyone else, what was the point of pretending she had a boyfriend if she couldn’t pretend to stand him? Jack is an easy conversationalist now that he’s opened up a little, and she knows he’s taking mental notes on what she’s saying.

“So, this Hayden guy. Is he ...” He tilts his head, gestures with a hand at himself.

Samira fills in the blank and says, “Old?” at the exact same time Jack goes on, “White?”

They both take a moment to stare at each other before they laugh.

“I grew up in Boston.”

“And I apparently grew up when Boston was being founded.”

They keep talking over their entrees. She briefs him on the rest of the guests and he asks all the right questions; by the time they board their plane (they have to stop in Boston before heading on, but thank everything they don't have to change planes), Jack's already identified which family members and friends are most important to their little (big) ruse. He lets her take the window seat, doesn't manspread beyond the limits of his middle seat (though his knee does brush hers in case she wants a bag of pretzels) and makes her laugh by fake-clutching, dry and defeated, at his chest when they go through a brief spot of turbulence. At baggage claim in Nantucket, he pulls her bag off the belt with care, then takes her hand in his suddenly.

"Look at me," Jack says lowly, urgently, and she immediately follows his direction as he squeezes her hand. He grins at her — a real, big grin — and says, "I'm pretty sure that guy with the sign that says *Samira Mohan and plus one* is waiting for us. So we're starting now."

"Oh," she replies, a little breathily, because his eyes look at her very warmly. "Yeah, uh, Kashi's the sort of person who sends car service to the airport."

He passes her her own bag, then immediately takes her hand again, blunt fingers grazing over her knuckles. It's the grasp of someone who's sure, who doesn't have to practice interlocking their fingers with their partner, who's been seeing them for a while. It's perfect.

"Here we go," he says.

"Here we go," Samira replies, smiling back at him.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“Samira?”

“Yeah?”

“Feeling fine, or ...” His voice trails off.

She turns back to him, takes in his matching yellow button-down that could use a couple more buttons done up if she’s going to be able to have a normal conversation with him or anyone else and plasters a smile on her face. “Feeling great!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The driver introduces himself as Steve, offers to turn the A/C to their liking and asks if they’ve been to Nantucket before. Jack says no. Samira says yes, remembering the handful of times her family had spent a week or two here during summer break. But it’s been years since she’s been able to join them; work has stopped her.

Jack runs his thumb over the back of her hand. He hasn’t let go of it since they got in the Chrysler; their arms meet in the middle of the spacious back seat. “Have you stayed at the hotel we’re going to?”

“No, this one’s new to me. New to everyone, I think. It’s the most upscale one on the island.”

Jack reads between the lines: Kashi couldn’t make do with anything old, run-down or, worst of all, cheap. Maybe Jack doesn’t get exactly that, but Samira thinks she implied it enough, and he keeps running his thumb back and forth, back and forth, in a way that soothes her nerves, fraying a little more with each inch they get closer to the wedding venue. “Ah. Well, it looked great on the website.”

The Neptune Resort and Retreat looks better in real life than it did on the website, actually. Well-groomed magnolias, beeches and evergreens surround the whitewashed brick and blue shutters; all of it stands out against the coast behind it. She can just about spot the dunes even from this distance, as they pull into the circle in front of the hotel. Steve parks smoothly and goes to get their bags from the

trunk; Jack takes the moment of them being alone to ask, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she lies, with a smile she knows isn’t convincing. He doesn’t call her on it.

They get out, go inside the lobby. There’s a group at reception in front of them. She hasn’t met Hayden’s family before, but the gaggle of people in front of them, all chatting, look a lot like him: very tall, fair hair, sort of stoic. The kids, a boy who looks about ten and a girl who’s maybe four or five, aren’t even playing or asking questions, like kids do: they’re standing around and just observing everything. Samira smiles at the girl when she gazes up at her, and the girl gives her a shy look in return before the family gets their keys and heads toward the elevators.

Shoulder to shoulder as they go up, Jack nudges her forward and lets her check in. He leans against the counter while she gives her name, ID and credit card over and affirms that she’s part of the Mohan wedding party, staying for 3 nights, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

The clerk gives Jack a thorough once-over, as much as he can from his side of the desk. Samira’s eyes do the same thing, trying to see Jack through a stranger’s eyes: his graying stubble is starting to come in on his jaw and down to his freckled neck, and his dark t-shirt is tight across his broad chest and shoulders. “Will the gentleman be staying in your room or needing separate accommodation?”

“Staying with her,” Jack says, a smirk crossing his lips as he reaches for his wallet and slides a card across the desk.

“Oh!” The clerk lights up at the sight of what must be some sort of Army ID. “We have a special program for those who have served our country so generously. Let me put you in our system, and you’ll get a discount on the room rate.”

“Do you have a discount for medical staff, because —”

The clerk shoots Samira down as quickly as she’d asked and doesn’t even glance in her direction. “No, nothing. Just for military and teachers.”

“I’m retired,” Jack says.

“That doesn’t matter to me, I mean, to *us* at the Neptune,” the receptionist — Terrance, his nametag says — with a bright simpering

smile, fingers tap-tapping away. “There you are, Mr. Abbot.”

Looking amused, Jack corrects, “Doctor Abbot. Think you have a room with an accessible shower for me?”

“Oh, *Doctor* Abbot,” Terrance says, realizing his error but trying to recover by placing emphasis on his title, “Of course. Let me see.” He types and clicks away, then says, “Here are your room keys. Please let me know if you need *anything* else.”

“Thank you, Terrance,” Samira answers, trying to hide a glower.

Resolutely, she watches the floor numbers change on the elevator panel instead of looking over at Jack. When they’re halfway to their floor, he says, “You know, it’s okay to look jealous.”

“I’m not jealous,” she says. What would she have to be jealous about?

“It’s okay to look it, though. You’d be jealous if someone was hitting on me, if we were together.”

The elevator doors *ding!* Samira, eager to get out of the conversation suddenly, takes a few big steps to get ahead of him and figures out which direction of the hallway they need to walk down. When she gets to their room, she has to wait for him to open it up, since he still has the keys. He takes his time.

“For what it’s worth,” he says as he ambles up and gestures for her to step aside so he can press the card against the reader, “I think it’s fine for you to get possessive.”

“I didn’t get possessive.” It’s a weak protest, one that seems more feeble when he catches her eye and wrinkles his forehead with a raised brow. “I’m not doing that. You can flirt with whoever.”

“But I can’t.” The door unlocks, and he holds it open for her to enter first. “I only have eyes for you, sweetheart.”

The pet name and lack of audible sarcasm makes her flush and wonder if he’s a better actor than he’d let on. Thankfully, she can turn away to pull her bag into the room so he doesn’t see it. The suite’s spacious, with French doors showing their own private patio.

“The lavender shrubs out there are really beautiful, huh?” she asks, knowing she’s deflecting.

“Yeah.” From the sound of his voice, he knows it just as well.

“And the wainscotting’s great.”

“That too.”

She wanders around the room, avoiding his gaze as much as she can. The TV’s big, the carpet’s pristine, the mini fridge is stocked with all sorts of mini bottles. She turns her attention to the wide arch leading to the bedroom and goes that way. The dresser and closet are more than enough for all their clothes, unless he’s packed his entire wardrobe from home. It’s only when she turns her attention to the four-poster that she realizes it.

“Look at the bed.”

Jack steps to her side. “It’s pretty nice.”

He’s right. As she takes in the soft-looking sheets tucked tight at the corners and the pillows that must feel like clouds, a frown forms on her face at the implications: for all that it looks welcoming, it’s not very *wide*. She glances back at the couch, wondering if he’ll be offended if she insists he sleep on the undoubtedly cushy mattress while she takes the couch, which is hopefully a pull-out.

“Just don’t try any funny business and we’ll be fine,” Jack says breezily. It’s almost weird how he’s anticipated her offer and preemptively shut it down. Is she that easy to read? She turns her head to follow him while he goes back to the sitting area and catches the smirk he throws over his shoulder.

They each start unpacking. She picks up her toiletry bag and starts making her way toward the bathroom. “Pretty sure we have a ‘welcome dinner’,” she sighs at the words, making sure to say them loud enough that he can hear them, “at seven. I’m going to freshen up, I won’t take too long if you want to do the same thing.” He calls out an affirmative noise.

The bathroom is as beautiful as the rest of the suite, and after she closes the door she immediately starts running the shower so it’s blazing hot. The mirror steams up, but not before she gets a good look at herself: shadows under her eyes, frizzy hair falling into her forehead, mouth drawn into a thin line. With the help of the hotel-provided, chamomile-scented body wash, she tries to scrub away all her questions — how Kashi and her friends will react to Jack, how Terrance had looked at Jack, if she looks at Jack the same way, if

sleeping in the same bed as him will be as awkward as it seems, if this plan is going to work at all. She tries to reason with herself and repeats the mantra over and over: *I have saved lives, and everything that's happening this weekend has lower stakes than that.*

When she feels both cleaner and less burdened, she wraps herself in a fluffy robe, fixes her hair so it has more definition, less frizz, and pats on some concealer. "All done," Samira declares as she floats out.

Jack, still hanging up his clothes, turns to smile at her; she watches his eyes drop from her face to her robe, then snap back up to her face again. She looks down, wondering if she didn't pull the tie closed enough and if she's flashing him, but it's fine. She barely has any cleavage on display, either.

"I'll be in and out. It's six-fifteen, by the way," he says, voice stilted, hurrying past her with a nod.

Okay. Jack's weird reaction aside, she's sure he'll feel better too after freshening up — who doesn't benefit from at least splashing cold water on their face and changing out of their travel clothes?

At the closet, she picks out a yellow silky dress with a low-cut neckline and halter tie, figuring it's probably best to use it to make a statement on night one: *I'm here, look at me!* Finding the spot in the suite farthest from the bathroom door in case Jack decides to come out when she's changing, she pushes her robe off, pulls on her underwear and slips the dress over her head. Her fingers are more used to suturing than tying the halter strings, and she takes an embarrassing amount of time fiddling with it. She thinks she's got it when she hears the bathroom door open and turns to face him.

His hair is a little damp, and a single bead of water trickles down his forehead and falls onto his clavicle. The white towel he's holding up at his waist stands out against the compact mass of freckled, flushed skin across his chest and arms. He's thickly built: no six pack but the real muscles of someone strong, someone who hauls patients from gurneys to beds several times daily and could probably lift her with one veiny arm if he needed to. There's a jagged scar a couple inches below his right shoulder and another, bigger one on the same side by his belly button. Fine, graying hair dusts across the center of his abdomen, from between his pecs down to his lower stomach, where the trail gets more prominent, like it's pointing her — oh, God. Oh, God, no. Samira gets why Jack had suddenly looked away from her when she'd come out in a robe, and *her* chest had been covered. His is totally exposed,

practically begging to be bit — no, no, she's not thinking about that. They're already committing so many HR violations just by being here together but she can't add sexual harassment via outright leering to the list.

"When you get, uh, dressed," she gets out as she turns away from him just as quickly as she'd turned towards him, "I think I need a hand with this."

"Yup," Jack says. "Give me a minute."

She keeps her eyes firmly forward throughout the rustle of his clothes. They really do have a nice view. The sky's clear, the ocean's gorgeous, there's probably birds chirping out there — and oh, Jack's behind her, seemingly stepping louder than usual to let her know he's coming, how considerate — she needs to think of anything but how his freshly-applied cologne smells in order to distract herself, she wonders if the obviously private beach has shells for her to pick — and he brushes his fingers over the nape of her neck to push her hair to the side, plucks the silk strings from her hands, and — if the restaurant has a patio, she'll try and push for their group to sit out there so they can make the most out of the beautiful weather — he pats her bare shoulder to let her know he's got it done, apparently on his first try. He steps away, and she stifles a sigh.

"Still feeling fine?" he asks.

She tries to remember that Jack is just doing this out of the kindness of his heart and, probably, a sense of boredom. She knows he can't get much excitement outside of performing complex procedures last documented in decades-old articles. He's probably here for his own personal kicks, a fun way to spend a three-off weekend when he doesn't have anything else to do. He's not here to be the object of her sudden-onset sexual fantasies that obviously have more to do with her empty bed at home than with how he, specifically, has been hiding all of that under his scrubs the entire time they've known each other.

She thinks again: *I have saved lives, and everything that's happening this weekend has lower stakes than that. I have saved lives, and everything that's happening this weekend has lower stakes than that. I have saved lives, and everything that's happening this w—*

"Samira?"

"Yeah?"

“Feeling fine, or ...” His voice trails off.

She turns back to him, takes in his matching yellow button-down that could use a couple more buttons done up if she’s going to be able to have a normal conversation with him or anyone else and plasters a smile on her face. “Feeling great!”

*

For all that Ravi weighs a hundred fifty pounds soaking wet, he barrels into Samira with the force of a bullet train. She rocks back on her heels, arms instinctively going around him in a hug, while Jack’s hand on her lower back keeps her upright. She manages to get a grateful glance in Jack’s direction from where she’s mushed under Ravi’s shoulder and sees his lips turn up in response.

“Did you get taller?” she asks, voice muffled, feeling like one of her aunties more than ever before with the question every kid loves getting asked. Ravi’s not a kid, though, he’s sixteen; she’s somehow missed his latest growth spurt.

“Yeah, actually,” he replies, laughing as he squeezes her tighter before he lets her go. “I’m six foot three now.”

“What’s the final prediction on how tall you’ll end up?” She reaches up to ruffle his hair like she used to be able to, and he dodges her with all the grace of an athlete — that’s right, he’s playing basketball now, and his team had gone to the state championships in the fall, according to the latest news from Samira’s mom.

Ravi shrugs big, shoves his hands in his pockets. “Eh. The doctor said if I keep going, I might hit six six.” He grins wide, “But you’re always gonna be tiny to me.”

“Excuse you, I’m actually taller than the average American woman!”

Ravi doesn’t respond and turns his short attention span to Jack, who extends a hand out. Samira watches the formal way Ravi takes and shakes it with serious gravitas, the firm up-and-down motion shocking her.

“You must be Ravi,” Jack says, releasing Ravi’s hand. “I’m Jack, Samira’s partner.”

Now, she feels her mouth drop open a little bit. A partner is different than a boyfriend, at least in her mind. Jack catches her gaze and says,

playing at a sheepish facial expression for Ravi's benefit, "Boyfriend — I'm hoping to be her partner. We're still pretty new."

That they are. They maybe should have discussed more specifics of their story, but ... Ravi doesn't seem to care. "It's really nice to meet you. She's never brought anyone to anything with us before."

"Really?" Jack answers with a small smile, taking her hand in his again (she wonders if they're going to hold hands through dinner; he had said in the hotel elevator that they could signal what they were doing right and wrong by squeezing each other's hands so that only they could see). "Then I must be special."

"You are," Samira says, smiling back; it's easy to agree, not a lie in the slightest.

She can tell Ravi really wants to say *ew*, but he holds it back in favor of leading them from the sidewalk to the restaurant's waiting area, where a large group of 17 turns toward them. At Samira's side, Ravi gives everyone another big grin and takes it upon himself to introduce them. "Hey — this is Samira, Samira is my cousin so she's Kashi's cousin too," Samira lifts her free hand and waves, "and Jack, Samira's boyfriend," Jack nods, like he's trying to be cool and mysterious, the Jack he'd been in her mind before he'd agreed to all this.

There's a murmur of *hellos*. The family from the hotel lobby earlier is there, and the girl nudges her brother with her hand so they can share a whisper. There's also four people she remembers from Cornell and has tried her hardest not to talk to since graduation, but it's Kashi's wedding and they're Kashi's best friends: Francesca, bridesmaid number one, Kashi's best friend since third grade, willowy and still bleaching her hair blonde; Oscar, her husband who Samira has never once heard speak more than ten words at a time; Whitney, Kashi's other best friend, picked up during sorority recruitment; and Whitney's newest boyfriend, Adam, who Samira vaguely remembers from those frat party nights Jack had teased her about yesterday.

Kashi herself is somewhere at the back of the crowd. Samira can't see her straight-on, but she hears the clap of her hands and a very familiar snicker, along with the word "finally", said in a tone that people who don't know Kashi would call a genuine whisper, but that Samira knows is meant to be heard. She's never been subtle. "We're ready for our tables now!" Kashi says, apparently towards the host, who waves a menu and instructs them to follow him.

In what must be the restaurant's event room, there's three large circular tables. Francesca pulls name cards out of somewhere and starts setting them out on the white tablecloths. The crowd starts to disperse, everyone looking around for where they've been assigned to sit. Jack tilts his head toward one of the tables, she nods, and they wander around the tables for a minute until she spots her name in between *Grant Lapointe* and *Daniel Lapointe*, with Jack's nowhere to be found.

Trying to get Francesca's attention quietly since they'd already made a scene just by showing up 'late' (yes, Samira had glanced at Jack's watch on the walk back here, and they were actually right on time), she says softly, "Hey, I don't see Jack's name card next to mine."

"Oh," Francesca replies as if Samira was saying that the weather's nice instead of a matter of serious urgency, "I think he's supposed to be at the one over there."

She points with a delicate finger towards the table in the corner, which is apparently the table for best friends and plus ones, judging from the people arranging themselves around the table. The other one has both of Kashi's parents, two people who look to be Hayden's parents, a guy who looks like an older brother of Hayden's and a woman who clings to him, and the two kids.

"Could I go over there with him?"

Francesca has never been particularly bright or, if she is, sympathetic. "Well, no, I don't think so. The name cards go where they go."

She's about to say that the name cards are card stock and are totally, completely moveable, but Jack squeezes her hand as he gives Francesca a look, one that Samira recognizes from the Pitt: it says *I'm going to be nice. For now*. "Could I sit here with her instead?"

Of course, Francesca doesn't know it, and she smiles broadly at him. "Oh, sure. Just ask if someone will switch with you."

Samira privately rolls her eyes but makes note of how people will seemingly fold if Jack asks them to do so. That combination of handsome face and matter-of-fact demeanor must come in handy. Jack smiles at a quiet wisp of a woman who's been resisting sitting down and she actually offers to swap before he even suggests it.

Kashi, finally fully visible to Samira from across the table — as pretty as ever, with a bridal glow helped by her white dress with a

sweetheart neckline, like she couldn't lay it on any thicker — makes a face while Samira and Jack very politely ask if other people would mind moving just one seat down so the two of them can sit side-by-side, which they do after Jack pulls out her seat for her. The first thing Kashi says when everyone at their table is settled is, "Samira, I'm so sorry. I didn't know you're so attached to him."

While Samira is trying to tamp down her instinctive response (words that are not nice enough to say in the general vicinity of children), Jack smoothly says, "You could say we're *very* attached to each other. Can't stand to be away from each other for more than 12 hours."

It's not technically untrue. When she's on days and he's on nights, they do make a point of seeing each other during the handoff. He asks her about her hard cases, gives her printouts of articles she might like and jokes about poaching her from Robby; she tries not to show how his praise makes her feel warm inside and makes him promise to tell her more about where he learned the tricky things. When they're off and they can't do their little ritual, she feels a little worse for it; she wouldn't say it out loud, but she does miss him and the way he determinedly keeps looking her in the eye so she knows he's listening.

"Oh, how sweet," Kashi simpers. "Aren't they so sweet, Hayden?"

At Kashi's side, Hayden smiles, a genuine one. "They are. Maybe we could do another round of intros for the table, so you all can get to know each other?"

They go around. Indy goes first and says, a little shyly, that he's a global health policy analyst, "very happy to be here celebrating my big sister"; Samira has to remember to give him a hug when they're all done, since she hadn't on the way in. Then Ravi introduces himself with characteristic gusto. Next is Grant, Hayden's older brother and a groomsman, who shares Hayden's perfect teeth; he's an architect, too, but in New York City. Last is Daniel, Hayden's younger brother; an architecture student, not a groomsman, he tells them with well-practised ease. Samira says that she's a resident physician in the emergency department at Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Center. Jack is last, and he says that he's an attending physician at PTMC's ER.

"Attending?" Ravi asks. "Does that mean you're the boss? I watched a couple episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* with my girlfriend. Derek Shepherd's the attending and he's like the boss. "

"In a way, yes, but I have my bosses too. There's a lot of hospital

administrators over me. Attending just means I supervise our residents, interns and med students, but we all do the same type of work.”

Samira squeezes Jack’s hand, hard, at the realization that Ravi, sweet little Ravi, has opened up a can of worms that Kashi, early bird that she is, will devour. Or something. The metaphor doesn’t matter as much as the way that Kashi bodily leans in, plants her elbows on the table, something which she’d once chided Ravi on doing, and says, “You’re not just the boss, but Samira’s boss?”

Everyone’s gaze snaps to them. Jack lays a hand on the back of her chair, so close to her skin but not touching; it’s grounding in the swirl of irritation Samira already feels.

“He’s not really my boss,” she answers. “He’s more like my boss’ friend, who I sometimes work with and sometimes supervises me when we sometimes work together. Or, like, if you worked at a branch of a company and the boss of another branch came in sometimes and helped you work.”

“So he does supervise you? So he’s your boss?” Kashi insists.

“In a way, and sometimes, but not really.”

Kashi *hmm*s in that way that means that she’s already made up her mind and continues, “Does anyone else at work know?”

“We’re keeping it private for now,” Jack says.

“A private relationship with your boss,” Kashi muses, with another *hmm*. “That’s certainly something.”

Samira grits her teeth, and she’s about to respond when Indy, always the peacemaker, quickly asks, “I’d love to know about the weirdest things you’ve seen in the ER, Dr. Abbot?”

Jack’s hand moves to her shoulder, and she squeezes his hand much more gently than the last time. They’re in the clear for now. Jack talks to Indy, Ravi and Kashi about some of the more outlandish cases, which frees Samira to buddy up to the Lapointe brothers. Hayden has Kashi’s ear, and Hayden’s brothers have Hayden’s ear. If Samira is going to win this weekend, she’ll need them to convince Kashi that Samira’s a delightful, well-adjusted woman who’s capable of having a real romantic relationship (which she is) and not a spinster, to use Mryna’s word (which she isn’t).

It's easy to get Hayden, Grant and Daniel to talk about their work and studies since they keep bouncing off each other, probably re-treading old conversations they've had a million times. They're not as outwardly affectionate as Samira's side of the family tends to be — she glances towards the other side of the table, where Ravi's basically sitting in the same seat as Indy — but it's clear they all get along and like each other.

By the time the servers have cleared their appetizer plates, the conversation's turned to the brothers' love lives. Well, really just Daniel's. The youngest one is also the only one who's single; Grant's partner, Carrie, is over at the third table, and Samira instantly feels bad about insisting on switching so Jack could sit next to her.

"I'll find someone eventually, I just want to focus on other stuff for now," Daniel says in the tone of voice that says that they've already covered this topic before. She'd know exactly what it sounds like.

"How old are you?" Samira asks over a sip of her wine.

"Twenty one."

"Oh, you have so much time. When you get to your mid-twenties, that's when everyone will really start hounding you."

Daniel shoots her a commiserating smile. "Is that what happened to you before you met him?"

Jack, hearing that their side of the table's back to talking to him, turns his head in their direction and nudges a little closer to Samira.

"What're you saying about me?" he says, conspiratorial in tone but actually said loud enough so the brothers can hear, too, making Hayden look amused.

"Nothing," Samira answers, watching the way Jack's brow wrinkles the slightest bit at the obvious white lie. "We were just talking about how a couple years ago everyone was on me to start dating."

Jack's eyes practically light up. "Really?"

She bites back a laugh and nods. "Mhm."

It feels so good to be in on the joke with someone rather than being the butt of it that Samira gets caught up in the moment, still staring back at Jack, as Ravi asks how everyone knew what they wanted to do with their lives.

“You already know what you’re going to do, you’re going to become an architect and come work with me and Hayden at the firm,” Kashi says. That’s certainly something, in Kashi’s words; Samira eyes the way Kashi seems nervous about it. On that side of the family, their professions have always been a sore spot; Kashi’s dad, Uncle Jay, and mom, Aunt Riya, had wanted all their kids to become architects too. When Indy had picked global health, it had been a huge point of contention. Samira remembers Thanksgiving dinners and Easter brunches for *years* where the main topic of conversation was why Indy was choosing to go into something so ... *not* architecture. And now it’s almost Ravi’s time to decide on a career path, and they’re laying into him before he even picks where he’s going to go for college.

“Well, yeah,” Ravi says; it’s a well-disguised brush-off. “But how am I gonna know it’s for me? Like, how did *you* guys know?”

There’s a brief moment of silence as they all look around, each trying to put off answering themselves, before Jack clears his throat and asks, “Do you know the show *ER*?”

Ravi shakes his head.

“*ER* was like *Grey’s Anatomy* in the ‘90s. Everyone watched it, everyone knew the characters, all that. The first episode aired my first semester in college. I watched it and I fell in love. Not with the plot — I couldn’t care less about Clooney,” they all laugh, “but the medicine. I mean, every episode they were saving lives, it was crazy. And I thought, you know, I want to do that too. I was already a chemistry major, so it was easy for me to switch from that to biology. Every fall semester, there was a new season of *ER*, new cases, and I got good at anticipating the diagnosis. I was such a whiz-kid that I got into one of the best med schools in the country. Couldn’t pay for it, though, so I got a scholarship from the Army and went on their dime. And I loved med school. Samira, did you like med school?”

She’s slow to answer, too taken aback by how *much* he’s talking about a time in his life she’s never heard him explain before. “Yeah, I did. I like solving problems, and it was basically all solving problems. For me, at least.”

“For me, too,” Jack says and runs his thumb up her shoulder, towards her halter tie. He makes sure it’s still secure, an idle motion as he goes back to talking to Ravi like he’s not touching her more intimately than she’s been touched in months, but how would he know that? “I just loved it. And I couldn’t wait to graduate and match somewhere and

start a residency and focus on surgery.”

Before he even says it, Samira knows that this is where things changed for him. The entire table senses it, too, seemingly waiting with bated breath. “Something happened, right?” Indy asks quietly.

“Yeah,” Jack says with a wry smile, “9/11. As soon as I graduated in 2002, the Army called me up, said it was my time to head over to Afghanistan. I mean, I wasn’t even licensed to practice on my own yet, but they were so short on people with any medical experience that they made me a field surgeon, and I was in charge of some of the medics. That’s when I really knew it was for me. Some of the stuff I saw, you know?” He pauses, and she gives his hand an encouraging squeeze; it seems to do the trick to get him to keep going. “And still, I wanted to be there, I wanted to help, I wanted to fix things, I wanted to save lives. I was in it, I got good at it, really good. They literally had to fly me out to get me to leave.”

Samira snorts out a small laugh. His sense of dry humor has gotten more familiar over the past few months, and she knows he’s making a joke that, right now, only she’ll get.

“That’s not funny, Samira,” Kashi snaps, like she’s genuinely offended on Jack’s behalf.

“Yeah, it is,” Jack replies, laughing too. “They had to fly me out in an Army chopper because they amputated part of my leg after an IED went off too close to my truck.”

“*Woah*,” Ravi exclaims, a sort of awe she’s only seen from him when he’d gotten a picture with a then-popular rapper at a meet-and-greet a couple years ago.

Hayden, Grant, Daniel and Indy all murmur out “thank you for your service” or something like it. Even Kashi begrudgingly mutters something.

Jack turns a little to face Samira, his eyes meeting hers, and she for a split second thinks that they’ve gone too far. He’s sharing a deeply personal story, being vulnerable with them, all in service of her trying to impress her family. Her stomach turns a little at how exploitative she’s being, and her face must do something because Jack smiles a little and leans to whisper in her ear, “Did you hear that? He said ‘*woah*’.” She can’t help but lighten up at the glee she hears in his voice.

Jack pulls back and gets Ravi's attention again, easily, the way he does when he commands the ER for an end-of-shift debrief. "What I'm saying is, when you lose something and you still wanna do what made you lose it, that's when you know."

"Thanks, Jack," Ravi says.

"You're welcome," he replies with a broad, honest smile that makes even Samira feel warm.

As their entrees come, Kashi manages to redirect everyone's attention back to herself and Hayden; she sighs about how hard it had been to decide between Nantucket, the Berkshires or Newport for their wedding weekend. The rest of them pitch in on the benefits of each location but, obviously, agree that Nantucket is the best, and they're having so much fun already, and isn't this restaurant the best?

Jack catches her eye when they're handed dessert menus. She points at the key lime pie, he nods, they order it with two forks. It's that simple.

*

When it's finally just the two of them in their hotel room, both making a beeline for the bedroom, Samira immediately asks, "So what did you think?"

Jack, reaching into his drawer in the dresser, glances over at her. "About what, specifically?"

"Kashi. Do you think she's buying it?"

"Oh, I do," Jack replies. He pulls out his pajamas and steps aside so she can do the same. "She's buying it and it's pissing her off."

"You really think so?"

"Yup."

She grins as she heads toward the bathroom to give them both privacy to change. She's already in when she realizes she needs help, and she calls, "Hey, think you could untie me?"

She watches Jack come up behind her in the mirror. He fits himself behind her, but she can still see the breadth of him, how wide and solid he is, and she tries not to look too hard.

Jack doesn't seem to mind, though, meeting her eyes. "Solid work, Samira," he tells her, fingers dancing along the silk at the back of her neck as she raises her hands up to her chest so the fabric doesn't immediately fall down. He leaves after a moment to let her get into her sleep shirt and shorts.

It's probably the drinks they've been sipping on all night, but as they settle into their separate sides of the bed (no funny business), she briefly wonders if he tastes like key lime and chardonnay. *I have saved lives, and everything that's happening this weekend has lower stakes than that*, she tries to think instead so she can fall asleep in peace.

Chapter End Notes

Two things:

1) THANK YOU, everyone, for your super supportive comments, kudos and subscriptions. It means the world to me, and I appreciate each of you.

2) I Tried (tm) with the Army stuff. I tried to do some research on Army med school scholarships and all that jazz, but ultimately ... it is what it is.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“Are you at least having fun?”

“Time of my life.”

She glances around the divider to see if he’s joking or not, but he’s already there with a faint smile on his face.

“Really?”

“Really. Swear I mean it.”

“I’ll get it,” Samira tries to say, but it comes out sleep-slurred and slow. She reaches over an arm that’s not hers — who *is* that? It’s been a while since she woke up with someone else in her bed — to pull the phone that’s very loudly blaring off the charger. She slides her finger across the bottom of the screen, brings it up to her ear and is met with Robby’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Hey, Shen’s asking if you’re ever coming back to nights, he says he misses you.”

“Dr. Shen misses me?” she asks, confused.

Robby asks, “Dr. Mohan?”

“Yes, Dr. Robby?” she gets out before yawning, already burrowing back into the mattress. It’s so warm.

“Is — are you with — I thought I called Abbot.”

Samira jolts, suddenly more awake than she’s ever been before, and takes stock of the situation. Jack’s thick forearm is laying over her waist, his breath is tickling the back of her neck and his cologne, what’s left of it, is all over the sheets. It’s Jack’s phone in her hand, she realizes; his phone had been plugged into the charger on her side of the bed. Her own phone is right there on the nightstand, untouched, no call from Robby there.

After a delicate pause, Robby says in his purposefully calm *I am going to ignore this for now so I can get on with my job* voice, “I will call Abbot back later. Have a good morning, Dr. Mohan.”

He hangs up. Samira holds the phone away from her face and stares at the lockscreen, which is an adorable Beagle staring down the camera. 6:19 am. She puts it back on the nightstand.

It takes a lot of work to get Jack to wake up. Normally, she's the same way, taking every last second of sleep she can before she has to head to work. But right now, that habit they apparently share is annoying, and she shakes his arm, digs her fingernails into the meat of his forearm and says his name a couple times. It's only when she switches to saying Dr. Abbot that he comes to abruptly.

"What's going on? You okay?"

"I'm fine," she replies, pushing down her latent amusement at the immediate concern in his voice, "but, uh. Your phone rang and I picked it up. It was Dr. Robby."

"He called me? Is *he* okay?"

"He sounded fine, he wanted to know about scheduling, I think, but he recognized my voice."

Jack sighs. "Shit."

Exactly. He rolls back and away from her, jarring her with the loss of warmth, but it's probably for the best, given ... everything. She stands, takes a couple steps away from the bed and turns to try to gauge his reaction. He's flung an arm over his face, blocking his eyes from the morning light or maybe from having to look at her. The top sheet is rumpled around his waist, and his hair is mussed.

What she can see of his mouth draws into a line. "I'll call him later."

Samira runs her hands through her hair. "Okay. Sorry I answered your phone."

"I unplugged yours in the middle of the night without telling you. *I'm* sorry."

The phone that is definitely Samira's lights up, and she reaches for it. It's a text from Francesca that starts off with an overly enthusiastic good morning message followed by a variety of emojis, ranging from the sun to a wave. She rolls her eyes but reads on.

"Oh, fuck," she says as she gets to the bottom of the cheery text that ends with *Looking forward to seeing your smiling face soon!*

Jack moves his arm so he can look at her. "Everything okay there?"

"We have to get going," she groans. "We have a full schedule today. They booked us massages at the hotel spa, then we have brunch on the beach, then you have to go golfing with the men while I go shopping with the women, and then we have a dinner cruise around the island."

Jack pushes himself up on the mattress and gives her a lopsided wry smile. He clearly isn't too tired to be sarcastic. "Kashi's too kind, setting all that up for us."

*

Predictably, the spa is as luxurious as everything else in the hotel. They're both considerably more bright-eyed by the time the receptionist brings them back, back, back, all the way to their own private locker room for two, because it's that kind of place. As they change into their robes, Samira takes advantage of the fact that they can't see each other, "Are you at least having fun?"

"Time of my life."

She glances around the divider to see if he's joking or not, but he's already there with a faint smile on his face.

"Really?"

"Really. Swear I mean it."

Even if it's not true, she smiles as she reaches for his hand, instinctive from just last night, when there's a knock at the door. Their massage therapists introduce themselves and lead them down a hallway to a room set up with all the fixings. She averts her eyes as Jack shrugs off his robe, leaving him in just his briefs, and leans on the edge of his table, presumably to pull off his prosthetic.

"Is everything okay?" Samira's assigned therapist asks when she doesn't immediately do the same.

"Yes," she starts, glancing over at where Jack's arranged himself, face-down, vulnerable, a towel covering his waist down. It's not her first massage, but it's a very different situation with him in the room, and she suddenly worries that he's not okay with this. Kashi couldn't have known that they're not really together when she booked this, but if she had ... Well, it'd be devious. "Jack, are you alright?"

“I’m great,” he replies, turning his head to face hers and blinking an eye open. “I’m used to it.”

Maybe his VA benefits cover massages or maybe he pays for something on his own, but either way, he looks relaxed already, the lines usually present across his brow smoothed out just in anticipation of the massage. It’s such a contrast from how he normally looks — generally fine, maybe a bit on-edge, sometimes hyper-intent on making sure a patient is responding to treatment, but always in control of the situation. She tries to put everything away, the same as he’s clearly done, as she follows her massage therapist’s soft instructions, settles on the table and turns, face smushed against her own headrest, to face Jack.

She must look off, somehow, because he catches her eye and pulls his arm forward enough to put a thumbs up in her line of sight. It makes her huff out a laugh that gets her a grin in response.

Samira’s therapist, Dominick, starts working on her back, and her eyes flutter shut. Nearly everything falls away at the sensation of pressure hitting where she needs it, kneading where she hadn’t known she’d been hiding tension — nearly, because her mind is replaying her short phone call with Robby. Doesn’t he have a responsibility to do ... something? Report them to hospital HR? Tell Dana? Tell *Collins*? Samira doesn’t know which is worse.

“Hey,” Jack says as they both flip onto their backs. She blinks her eyes open and is faced with Dominick’s confused expression. They both turn to look over at him. His eyes are still closed, face tilted up towards the ceiling. He looks blissed out; Samira wonders if Megan, his massage therapist, is that good or if he reacts like that to everyone’s touch — “I can hear you thinking from over here.”

“Yeah,” she says, not even bothering to deny it before she asks, “Do you think Dr. Robby’s going to tell anyone?”

“For what?”

“You’re an attending, I’m a resident.” It’s literally the textbook example of *what not to do in your workplace*.

Jack snorts a little. “If Mike has a problem with that, he should look in the mirror before he tattles on us.”

“Because of Dr. Collins?”

“Yup.”

“Are they still ...?” Dominick stretches her arm like he’s warning her not to continue disrupting the supposed-to-be-calm environment.

“You’re sworn to secrecy,” Jack says.

“I swear.”

“They are. Were on a break for a while, but they’re back on.”

Samira feels relief course through her. It’s good that Robby and Collins are dating — not just for them, because she’s gotten a good sense of how much they like each other, but for her and Jack, too.

“And you don’t think there’s anything wrong with that?”

“If she was an intern or med student, yeah. Collins is grown. She’s probably the most grown person working on day shift. She knows what she’s doing.”

It must be the way Dominick presses on her shoulder, really putting his elbow into it, the pressure almost painful with how good it feels, that gets her to ask, “Do you think Dr. Robby’s thinking the same thing about us?”

He probably thinks Jack’s taken advantage of the power imbalance, the age difference, her obvious respect for him. He doesn’t even know that Jack’s been a total gentleman and that nothing’s even *happened* between her and him. She’s just gotten on his good side again, as tenuous as it is; there’s always a push and pull between them, mostly about quality versus quantity of patients served, but she feels like he’s given her more approving words in the last few months than in the past three years combined.

Jack doesn’t answer for a minute or two. She glances over at him again; a wrinkle between his brows is the only indication she gets one way or the other, before he answers, “You’re the best doctor to come through the Pitt in years. You’re smart, patient and diligent. You’re a highly capable woman with a good head on your shoulders. I trust you every minute of every shift we work together. Robby can draw his own conclusions about if you know what you’re doing, but I know where I stand.”

Before Samira can process what he’s just said to her, Jack continues, tone lighter, “He won’t tell anyone, but he’s gonna interrogate me

when he wakes up from his post-shift nap. I'll handle it."

*

After Dominick and Megan finish working on them and they're both visibly more relaxed, they head back to the hotel room, change out of their comfortable clothes and into more brunch-appropriate attire. For Jack, it's a blue-and-white patterned button-down and khaki pants; for Samira, a breezy blue linen midi dress.

"You know, you're really good at this."

"Hm?" Jack murmurs as he fingers the top-most button on his shirt, a slight frown on his face. "Should I keep this one done?"

"Matching me," she answers, glancing over at him from her perch on the edge of the bed as she tries to buckle her sandals. "What's the goal in keeping that button done?"

By text, as they were setting all this up, he'd been noticeably worried about his fashion sense; she has a feeling it's a bigger thing for him than just clothes. "Modesty?"

She laughs too loud, the noise echoing off the walls for a second before Jack joins in. He's — good. He's really good at this. Making her feel like this whole weekend isn't completely strange, like she's someone worth being around outside of the Pitt. Despite the sincerity in his words while they were at the spa, she wonders again if he's a much better actor than he'd let on. Broadway-grade maybe.

"Undo it," she replies with a shrug, trying not to let on how much of him she wants to be able to see without it being even weirder. He doesn't need to know about the fact that she's now projecting sexual fantasies onto him. "You know, it's the beach. Casual. A couple buttons undone is fine."

"A couple, like —"

"Two," she says, eyeing him before she stabs herself with the tiny pinprick of the clasp on her shoe and pulls a face. It doesn't hurt, just was unexpected, and Jack's attention sharply turns to her. Before he can use that some tone on her that he'd used this morning — full of warmth and urgency as he'd asked if she was okay — she doubles down, "Three, actually. You only had two undone last night. We have to show you off."

“So no modesty?”

“Three, Jack.”

He undoes the asked-for buttons without a further word, but with a conspiratorial raise of his eyebrows.

“You want some help, or?” He nods at where she’s still bent over her shoe.

“No, I’ve got it,” she answers quickly. After a minute (or two) of fumbling with it some more, she gets it done with a huff of laughter at her own clumsiness. She can do a pigtail catheter but she can’t get her own sandals on.

“I was thinking,” Jack says, “that we should talk about our strategy for today. Last night we played up that I’m a doctor and a wounded vet —”

“I don’t know if ‘wounded vet’ is what I’d call you,” she interjects, frowning at his simplistic self-assessment, before he raises a hand to say *let me continue*.

“It’s what most people would, and that’s fine. So, doctor, they’re in awe. Wounded vet, they’re sympathetic. Works great, builds up people liking me, which is important. Now, today, we should really show them that you’re just as great as they think I am. You’re worried they think you’re not up to their standards, right?”

She’d technically said that they thought she was a boyfriend-less old maid, but she nods anyway, a little stunned at the depth of thought he’d put into their tactics when she was just going with what felt natural.

“We’ll show them that you’re up to mine. Kashi won’t be able to disagree with everyone else, that’ll piss her off worse than anything else.”

“And they’ll suddenly just think I’m great, huh?”

“From what you said, male validation is what they put a premium on. When I show them you’ve got my stamp of approval, they’ll be as docile as lambs under sedation.”

“It’s not that easy.” And, frankly, it’s just too good to be true. He doesn’t know her family nearly as well as she does, doesn’t know how

Kashi once argued with Samira about how much medical school cost while Samira was literally in medical school. She's impossibly stubborn. If they do manage to pull off the miracle of getting the rest of them to fully buy it, Samira can't *really* imagine Kashi budging. It sends a flare of panic through her, that they could do all this and it could not change Kashi's mind at all.

Jack seems to notice and extends her a hand, ostensibly to help her up from the bed, but he gives her hand in his a firm squeeze as he says, eyes fixed on hers, "It might be that easy. Let's try it out."

She sighs, shrugs a little.

"We're already here," he reminds her. "We're on day 2 of 3. We did it last night, we'll do it again today, we'll do it again tomorrow. We're doing it well. What we're doing is *easy*." When she doesn't respond, he gives her another squeeze and dips his head. She looks up the couple inch difference between them. "It's easy," Jack repeats; she takes it as an addition to her own mantra. Not only has she saved lives and everything that's happening this weekend has lower stakes than that, but it's easy, too.

She squeezes his hand back, a quick thank you for the reassurance. "Right."

"C'mon, Samira, like you mean it. It's easier than placing a transvenous pacer blind, isn't it? And I saw you do one of those on Tuesday."

"It's easy," she replies, nudged on by the intense look in his eyes. She's been grasping at straws with Kashi since their relationship soured, but Jack has given her a golden opportunity, one that doesn't feel like it's work.

"So, our tactic for today is to show them that I'm very interested in you. They like me, they see I like you, they like you more, we beat your cousin at her own game the night before her wedding. Sound like a plan?"

His deadpan delivery makes her laugh and nod. She apparently isn't immune to the charm he'd whipped out on Francesca last night so he could sit next to her, though the word charm feels a little generous for the deadpan way he just talked her through her remaining doubts about the outcome of the weekend.

"Sounds like a plan," Samira agrees, squeezing his hand back.

Francesca, clearly sternly warned by Kashi, really does separate them this time. As lovely as the set-up on the beach is — one long, long table that fits all of them, far enough from the water that their feet don't get wet but close enough that they can hear each the soothing sound of each wave — Samira feels herself groan when she realizes that Jack is sat right next to Kashi, while Samira's stuck in between Kashi's friend Whitney and her boyfriend Adam. If Samira knows right, the placement is intentionally meant to put Samira on edge for the rest of the day after lulling her into a false sense of security with the couples' massage.

Unfortunately, it's Kashi's plan that works. Her friends and their partners seesaw between ignoring her and asking her a ridiculous amount of questions to bring them up to speed on Samira's life since undergrad graduation.

What nearly sets her off is this: Adam is a misogynist. She hadn't really remembered that fun fact about him from college, but he reveals himself when he asks yet another question about how practicing medicine must take up so much of her valuable time as they're finishing up their entrees.

"I mean, if both of you are in the ER, who's doing the dishes at home, right?" he asks with a chuckle.

It's not like she hasn't heard something like that before — once a patient asked her if her husband knew she had a job, assuming both that she was married and that her assumed husband could somehow miss her leaving in scrubs every morning and coming home 12 hours later with the worst cases of the day haunting her eyes — but for some reason, his application of sexist logic to her relationship with Jack makes her clench her jaw in annoyance.

"I do the dishes," Samira says, waiting for Adam's smug face to light up so she can continue, "and so does Jack. I do the laundry, and he does the laundry. I vacuum, he vacuums, too. We split everything equally."

"Isn't that, you know, emasculating? Making your boyfriend do chores?"

"I don't make him do anything," she replies hotly, very close to pointing a finger in his face. "He wants to do it. In fact, he suggested a 50/50 split of the chores when we moved in together."

The lie is out of her mouth before she realizes that she has no way to tell Jack about this important development to their story until they're back together, so Jack could be saying something completely different to Kashi. If Whitney is listening in — which she is, judging from how Whitney's not saying anything but is raising an interested eyebrow with every word Samira says, she realizes belatedly — then she's definitely going to report everything Samira's saying to Kashi, who will analyze all that she's learned about Samira and Jack and come to the inevitable conclusion. *Fuck*.

"How long have you two lived together?" Adam asks.

"A week," Samira makes up, remembering that they agreed that their relationship is on the newer side. She's just fast-tracking it even more.

"Yeah, he'll get tired of that real quick."

She doubles down on it: if they were dating, her sense of indignation on his part would be completely justified. "No, he won't. He's my partner in every sense of the word."

"Talk to me again in a year," Adam laughs.

I hope I don't ever have to talk to you again, stupid bigoted asshole, she thinks as hard as she can in Adam's direction before turning her attention down the length of the table to check in on Jack. He's deep in conversation with Kashi, as much as someone can be with someone who sucks up all the air in the room; his eyes are fixed on her face, nodding when she takes a break to take a sip of her mimosa. It's the same kind of attention he pays Samira, and it, like the encounter in the lobby yesterday with Terrance, makes her cheeks heat. What has Kashi ever done to deserve that look from him?

She foregoes dessert and is all too eager to be the first to get up when everyone else is done. Jack makes his way over to her end of the table and motions for her to take a walk with him down the beach. He's hardly brought her close to his side, an arm curled around her back and a hand resting on her waist, when she whispers in his ear, "We've been living together for the past week and we split all the housework down the middle."

"Oh, good, because I'm ready to propose," Jack whispers back.

"You — you're —"

"It just sort of slipped out," he says, keeping his eyes forward, with an

expression on his face she can only describe as sheepish, though the word's never applied to him before. "I'm looking at rings and trying to figure out if you wanna get married in the fall or spring."

Samira's weak answer is, "Summer, preferably."

"Kashi was so stunned she started bragging about how Hayden proposed, so I think it's a good addition to our story." She feels him lift his shoulder against hers in a small shrug. "I'm head over heels for you. And everyone at our end of the table, your uncle and aunt and cousins, they were all very happy about it."

"Oh, good." Good. This is good. In this fantastical scenario where they're so very into each other that they live together, they split the housework and he's thinking about marriage. It might all send another nervous tingle down her spine, but it's objectively good. *Suck it, Kashi.*

Jack turns them around, back towards the few stragglers who are taking their time — Ravi waves at them, though Samira suspects it's really intended for Jack — and says as an afterthought, "Oh, and you love my dog."

"What's its name?" she asks, remembering the picture from his phone's lockscreen earlier in the morning.

"His name is Snoopy," he replies without a hint of sarcasm.

Samira grins over at him. "You named your dog Snoopy?"

"When I adopted him, he was named Snoopy, and I tried to get him to respond to something else, but it didn't work. He's stubborn." He sounds fondly exasperated.

"Yeah, I love your dog," she says with a laugh, already knowing it's true.

They get off the sand, into the parking lot, where there's two shuttles waiting for them — one helpfully labelled *Gentlemen* with a golfing emoji and the other labelled *Ladies* with a shopping bag emoji. They extricate themselves from each other, Jack giving her a nod and a mouthed *see you later*, which she returns with a smile and a *bye, Jack*.

*

Kashi is a dead ringer for her mother, especially from the back. As they and the rest of the group traipse through downtown Nantucket,

Samira takes some time to compare the two. Perfectly smooth wavy hair, long fingers, a grace to the way they move, despite Kashi's stride having a touch more arrogance to it like she owns the very sidewalk they're on. Personality-wise, though, the two couldn't be more different: Aunt Riya is soft-spoken where Kashi's strident, sensitive where Kashi's brash, well-intentioned where Kashi's, well, evil.

As Kashi leads them into a store that exclusively sells sunglasses but is pointedly not Sunglass Hut, Aunt Riya takes Samira by the arm and asks her about how her mom is doing.

"She's fine," Samira replies; it's simpler to say than *she couldn't be here because when she got the invitation she started crying and saying that weddings make her heart hurt too much and she had to do some woo-woo ritual to make herself 'whole' again*. "I'm sorry she couldn't make it."

Aunt Riya nods and smiles serenely. "It's okay. Please let her know that we always miss her, and especially this weekend."

"I will," Samira says, smiling back. After her dad had passed and her mother had tucked herself into her grief and, later, a so-called "spiritual healing center" in Colorado, Aunt Riya had been there for her with a tight hug and a homemade meal, always treating her like one of her own even when her own oldest daughter had turned inexplicably on her former best friend.

They chitchat for a while as they browse. Aunt Riya asks about her progress on her research; Samira sees pictures of her new cat and a concept picture for a building in downtown Boston she's just finished planning. It's easy, pleasant, a relief after the deeply uncomfortable conversation over brunch.

Samira tries on a pair of cat-eye sunglasses as Aunt Riya says what a nice man Jack is. There's no hesitation, false or true, and no question there, either: it's a relief after all the pointed questions. It sounds like Aunt Riya actually cares. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do. I think he's very kind."

That, from the kindest person she knows, makes Samira pull Aunt Riya into a hug that the older woman easily returns. She doesn't let go before Samira does, just smiles when Samira pulls back and gives her a lingering pat on the back.

Kashi whispers something to Hayden's mom as she hands Francesca a bag with the sunglasses store's logo on it and then takes them across

the street. It's an nautical-themed apparel and accessory store that Samira remembers vaguely from past vacations, a real staple of the island, with an entire section in the back devoted to sailing-themed trinkets that Samira and Aunt Riya gravitate towards. Making an assumption she really, really hopes is right, she buys a travel coffee mug that says *I'm the captain, I make ship happen* above an anchor symbol. They go on like that for a couple more hours across the various stores Kashi brings them to, idly talking and catching up as they browse and sometimes buy things: a raffia tote that Aunt Riya falls in love with; a zip-up hoodie that Samira can see herself wearing over her scrubs and a red dress perfect for a Pitt girls night out; matching candles in sea salt and sage that they agree will remind them of this weekend as they burn.

The jewelry store at the end of the downtown area is quieter than the rest of the shops they've been to so far, with two very elderly folks behind the counter. Their entire group takes over the entire space, eagerly looking at the wares on display: bracelets, earrings, chains, pendants. In each of the pieces Samira looks at, apparent even through the glass, is craftsmanship. Someone worked on these things with love, and the people behind the counter look very proud to be able to show them off.

Samira doesn't know anything about jewelry, not really, beyond that she's a gold person who could wear silver if she wanted to. But she's so taken by the way the woman (who introduces herself as Pamela with a little wave of her hand) rolls with the punches when Samira admits that she doesn't wear jewelry on a regular basis that she submits to some non-judgmental, non-pushy questioning. What would she wear day-to-day? What's her favorite article of clothing — what color, what does the neckline look like? Does she own any luxury jewelry items already — say, a graduation gift, or a pearl necklace? Does she know her ring size?

"Oh, she might need to know that," Kashi remarks as she slides up to Samira, who had heard her coming but felt it was just plain rude to step away from her. Her cousin, of course, has none of the same concerns, getting all up into Samira's space at the counter looking above, yes, the ring selection.

Pamela breaks into a wide, toothy grin. "Is a proposal imminent?"

Samira hams up her bashfulness a little (a lot), since Kashi and the gigantic rock on her finger are right there, as she answers, "I hope so."

“I could just tell you’re in love,” Pamela practically swoons; so do Aunt Riya and Hayden’s mom, who have gathered nearby too.
“Where’s the lucky person?”

Kashi jumps in to explain that the men are bonding at the golf course, while they’re just doing some casual shopping, as if Kashi hasn’t been obviously checking stores that Samira won’t even pretend to know how to pronounce off her mental list.

“He’s probably having fun,” Samira says, more to herself than to Pamela. It’s hard to imagine Dr. Abbot the ER cowboy taking a swing at the golf course, but she lets herself picture it and grins.

Pamela’s in the middle of saying something else about how sweet Samira’s face gets when she’s thinking about her special someone when Kashi taps the glass counter with a finger, interrupting seemingly everyone’s thoughts, and asks, “What kind of ring do you think his wife has?”

There’s a perfectly cinematic beat of silence before everyone in earshot turns their attention to Samira’s reaction.

She tries to use the same tactics that she does when a patient truly surprises her, though after years in the ED almost no one does anymore. Her goal is a perfectly neutral expression, devoid of anything at all, but it’s impossible for her to plaster it on her face when Kashi has just accused her of being the other woman. *I have saved lives, and everything that’s happening this weekend has lower stakes than that, and it’s all easy to do, and fuck Kashi, fuck Kashi, fuck Kashi.*

“I saw the ring on his finger,” Kashi continues, eyes wide and faux-innocent. “When you were introducing him, you didn’t say he was married. Is that what you’ve been doing in the ER? Seducing your married boss? You must be good at it, if he’s getting ready to pop the question to you before he’s done with his wife.”

It’s a good thing that Aunt Riya is right there, because while Samira has never been inclined towards violence she feels the urge now to do — something. Slap her, punch her, push her, kick her, something. It’s the worst thing Kashi’s ever said to her, the implication clear and ugly.

Instead of being a spinster, she’s a homewrecker who uses her prey to get ahead, sleeping her way to the top; her very hard work through years of med school and her residency doesn’t matter because she’s got herself into the bed of an attending. It negates everything she’s

worked for, everything she's tried to prove, especially to this side of the family; it says, *your dad wouldn't be proud of how you got to this point in your career.*

It makes her blood boil.

With the help of several deep breaths and the realization that the truth, grief-laden as it may be, is on her side, the red at the edges of her vision starts to recede. It's the pat of Aunt Riya's hand on her arm, warm and soft, that makes her unclench her jaw and speak.

"Jack's wife died twenty one years ago in a car accident, and because he was practicing battlefield medicine in Afghanistan at the time, he couldn't say goodbye to her. He wears the ring because he loved her a lot," she replies, enunciating every word so Kashi can't miss a single thing.

Kashi's mouth drops open, then she snaps it closed so hard Samira thinks she can hear her teeth clack. Her face has changed considerably; all the snobbish joy that had been there just minutes ago has morphed into dismay and irritation. It's a terrible look on her, but it's a great look for Samira to memorize.

"You know what they say about assuming things," Samira says, making sure to put the triumph she feels in her tone. Samira's mom had repeated the words of wisdom to them over and over when they were kids: *when you assume, you make an ass out of 'u' and 'me'!*

She adds, "Oh, and don't talk about me and Jack like that, and don't imply again that I need to sleep with anyone to succeed, because I don't. I'm a good doctor, Kashi, and I hope you don't ever need my medical assistance."

She stares at her cousin for a few moments longer until Kashi, maybe realizing that Samira has outed her as thoughtless and mean-spirited in front of her own wedding guests, turns away and practically storms out of the store.

Aunt Riya squeezes Samira on the shoulder with a supportive little smile before she follows Kashi. Carrie, Grant's partner, whispers "woah" in the exact same way Ravi had last night when Jack had told them about how he ended up with a prosthesis. Samira is the last to leave; as the bell above the door tinkles when she opens it, Pamela calls, "When you do need that ring, please come back, dear."

They browse through a couple more stores before the shuttle bus pulls

up at five sharp to take them back to the hotel. Kashi, much more subdued than before, reminds them that they should use the next hour or so to change — the dinner cruise is cocktail attire, so don't underdress, please! — and pointedly faces forward, despite both Francesca and Whitney whispering to her, probably still trying to reassure her.

*

"Do you need help with your dress?" Jack calls. She'd been reliving the past few hours instead of actually getting changed for bed:

It was a buffet, and there were no name cards, and they'd been able to sit and finally *relax* with Indy and Ravi, and the "mixologist"-cum-DJ had poured plenty of drinks and played plenty of Britney Spears, and Jack had twirled her and twirled her and twirled her until she got dizzy and Jack had said laughingly that he had to sit down to preserve his energy, and she'd scooted her chair closer to his, and Kashi had ignored them despite them being right within her line of sight, and it felt so damn *good* to be able to stick it to her like that, and Jack had grinned with those crows' feet around his eyes when she'd told him about how Kashi had practically deflated in the jewelry store, and he'd told her that he was so proud of her and squeezed her knee and not her hand, and that was new, and it had sent a shiver through her whole body, and Jack had done it again on the ride back to the hotel, and she'd pulled him closer to her by his blazer sleeve in the elevator up to their room, and he'd grinned again and he was clearly just as tipsy as she was, and —

"Yeah," she calls, bracing herself against the bathroom counter at her front with her hands on the cool marble.

He walks in, footsteps sure and steady, and smiles at her in the mirror. He brings his hands up to the nape of her neck, where he'd tied the halter strings of her brand-new red dress earlier ("we won't match, but you have to wear it, Samira, I mean it," he'd encouraged in their hour to change before the cruise). She pushes her now-frizzy hair to the side, any sleekness she'd cultivated in the brief hour before the cruise gone as a result of dancing to the point of dewiness. Their fingers touch for a second before she looks in the mirror at him.

All of his attention at this distance, the strong line of his body behind her, makes her cheeks heat and her heart flip. It's the same way he had looked at her after she'd performed a lateral canthotomy on a patient a few weeks ago. It wasn't his usual look of approval; that

time, it had been tinged with something else, and she recognizes it now too.

She acts before she can think about it, moving her hands to cover his suddenly before she interlaces their fingers. He doesn't flinch, doesn't move beyond a twitch of his finger on the curve connecting her neck and shoulder.

"Jack," Samira murmurs, taken aback by the depth of want that runs through her when she realizes he's letting her make the first move; it swoops low in her stomach. She moves their hands up to the halter strings. "Your strategy today was showing everyone else how interested you are in me."

"Yeah," he replies, eyes steady on hers. Knowing, waiting. "Yeah, it was."

"Could you show me, too?"

Jack exhales a sigh that stirs the stray hairs at the back of her neck. "Anything you want."

She undoes the strings and lets the front of the dress fall forward.

"Jesus Christ," he intones, disbelief apparent, as he takes her in through the mirror. His eyes drop to where she's bare, her nipples already hard from the anticipation. Everything happens at once, it seems: she brings her hands in front of her, shudders when he palms her breasts, proprietary, before he pushes her dress past the curve of her hips and lets it fall to the floor. His hands trace the center of her abdomen, settling his fingers around her ribs, while he hooks his chin over her shoulder and says, breath hot on the shell of her ear, "So beautiful."

That sends a shudder down her spine, and he catches it, because he's an observant bastard. He keeps talking as he plucks at her nipples, making her press forward into his hands and backwards into the stiff length poking at her thigh, "I've been thinking about you all day, talking you up like you deserve. It's been so easy, you make it so easy. So so smart, so funny. I can't believe I get to be here with you."

Samira gets a hand on the strong muscle of his thigh, not for support — she's basically caged in against the counter, and her feet are mostly on the ground — but to get closer to him, to encourage him to keep going. "I still can't really believe you offered to come with me," she admits, voice embarrassingly breathy already. "I thought you were

joking.”

“I’ve been flirting with you for over a year hoping you’d notice me and think I was worth a shot. I’ve been waiting,” he stops to press a kiss to her neck just below her ear, chaste despite its placement, “for an opportunity like this, Samira. Mean it.”

“So you were lying when you said no funny business?”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You said ...” Her train of thought is broken when he slips a hand down into her underwear, a finger teasing around her clit before moving between her folds. “Fuck. You said you were — fuck — head over heels for me.”

If he hadn’t been lying, if he isn’t lying now ... She throbs. *Over a year.* Has she really been that focused on work that she didn’t notice Jack fucking Abbot trying to get her attention?

“Meant it all,” Jack whispers into her ear, eyes locked on hers, while he adds another finger into the mix, wetting them both then pressing them inside her in one smooth slide. “All of it.”

The thing about doing this in front of the mirror above the bathroom’s double sinks is that while she can see their faces and torsos, she can’t see him angling his hand to press the heel of it against her clit, not without looking down. And Jack’s gaze is so arresting she feels caught, helpless to break their eye contact while he tells her he has and does want her.

“Even the proposal?” Samira asks, her other hand clutching at his thick forearm as he starts to curl his fingers on every stroke in.

“I was manifesting,” he admits.

That makes her huff out a laugh, and he groans against her neck, “Fuck, that was hot. You clenched up tight.”

“Yeah?” She does it again, captivated by how he grinds his still-clothed dick into her ass in response.

“Yeah,” Jack replies, voice tight. “No funny business was manifesting, too. I knew if you let me see you like this, we might not leave the room. Like this,” he meets her eyes, indicating how she looks: she’s panting, pupils blown out, nails digging into his skin harder and

harder the closer she gets. And she's already close. It's his voice, mostly. If she makes it through this weekend in one piece (the way he's studying her has her wondering what he's going to do with all that knowledge), she doesn't think that she'll be able to act normally at work now that she knows the way gravel can run through his voice.

When he tells her with awe how lucky he is to see her like this, she comes so hard she lifts onto her toes for a long, nearly-blinding moment.

As she sags back against him, she murmurs, "Clothes off. Take me to bed. We're making up for lost time tonight. And we're skipping whatever bullshit Kashi has planned tomorrow morning."

Samira finally looks at him properly, face to face, not through the mirror. He looks as wild as she feels.

"Is kissing part of the fake wedding date agreement?" she asks.

"It is now," Jack says and kisses her soundly.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

He wraps his arm around the back of her chair. “Very polite of you.” And, lower, in her ear, “There’s still time to make a big scene, if you want to.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I swear to God, if it’s fucking Robby again —”

Jack’s voice is still raspy with sleep, but no less emphatic for it. He removes his arm from where it had been laid around Samira’s middle, does something to make the phone’s ringing end abruptly and brings his arm back, enveloping her again against his front.

“Who was it?” she whispers, laughing as she snuggles back into the solidness of his body. She presses a kiss to the dip in his collarbone next to the hickey she’d left last night during round — two? Three? The hickey, juvenile as it is, makes her smile and kiss him again there.

He shivers, his fingers tapping up the knobs of her lower spine, L5 to L1. There’s not a stitch of clothing on either of them, and she can feel him grow harder where his cock is trapped between their bodies. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It sorta matters,” Samira says between more kisses to his skin, soft and firm under her lips. Even in the slivers of light streaming between the blinds, she can see the freckles at the top of his chest that disappear down his pecs and presses her mouth to a particularly dense constellation above the scar on his right shoulder.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jack repeats.

“Sorta does.”

Jack presses a kiss to the top of her head, tender. “Doesn’t,” he says, with finality she’s happy to ignore and keep softly, affectionately bickering about, until he asks, “Are you sore?”

It sends a thrill through her even though Samira is sore. Very

pleasantly sore, but sore. He'd put her through a workout, to say the least, but she's been through worse — Langdon had once dragged her to the gym and she'd literally cried when she felt every single one of her muscles twinge in unison from his objectively punishing routine. "A little."

"Mm." Jack's voice is considering. "Want to?"

Samira wiggles back enough to look at him like *are you stupid?* That's what she intends, at first, then she sees Jack gazing down at her with amusement and lust in equal parts, a combination she literally couldn't have imagined until yesterday. His eyebrows are raised, his lips are turned up at the corners, his eyes practically twinkle as they darken. It's a good look on him, and she likes being the recipient of it.

No sooner than she smiles and says "yeah" does he pull her in closer, higher up his body, grinning, the weight of him against her just right (she'd told him last night that she wants to *feel him*, and he'd delivered), his dick hot and thick between their stomachs. He leans in and kisses her gently; her arms go up around his shoulders, his neck, keeping him as close as possible. It should be sort of gross, given that neither of them have brushed their teeth or showered, but she doesn't care at all; it seems like he doesn't, either.

Jack tries to move down, lips brushing over the hinge of her jaw to her earlobe to the sweet spot halfway down her neck, his stubble making her skin tingle. He'd taken the exact same path last night — round two, maybe — and, while she'd loved that (his nose nudging her clit, his fingers spreading her open), she tangles her hand in the mildly overgrown curls at the nape of his neck and tugs just enough to make him pause.

"I want you," she tells him straight to his face. Anything less than total honesty is out of reach right now, and she doesn't have the urge to downplay her desire anyway. Jack likes hearing it, doesn't shame her, takes pleasure in it. He runs a hand down her side, grips her thigh gently and hoists it up over his waist. At the slide of his hand between her legs to check how wet she is (very), her head audibly *thunks* forward and their foreheads touch.

Soothingly, Jack kisses her on the side of her mouth. "Samira," he murmurs against her cheek, "I think we ran out of condoms."

Oh, Samira thinks from somewhere both far away and very close. Apparently, they'd used up the small strip he'd brought in his suitcase,

the condoms that she'd teased him over; he'd flushed and said something about physical tools for manifestation. She's a dogged proponent of safe sex, yeah, and normally she'd get spooked by a partner suggesting they forgo protection, but — it's Jack. If she trusts anyone with this, it's him. And they really *had* run out of condoms, and the idea of her languishing in bed while he goes to the nearest CVS makes her want to whimper, despite the fact that she's never once thought of herself as languishing anywhere. She doesn't whimper, though, just asks in her best approximation of *woman who doesn't care one way or the other*, "Do you want to go get more?"

He kisses her on the other side of her mouth. "Honestly?"

"Honestly," she affirms.

"I really, really don't want to leave you, Samira."

Samira eyes him. He's just as honest as she is like this. "I'm STI negative, and I'm on birth control."

"Me too," Jack says before he kisses her right on the lips this time, matching her smile as he pulls back. "The first thing. Though, I can get on birth control, I saw a very promising study about segesterone acetate gel —"

She arches up to kiss him again, laughing into it. "I know, I saw that article too. For now, though, don't go too far."

"Sure." He pulls her leg up again, thumb stroking the outside of her thigh.

If she wasn't a little more used to it by now, his staring would unnerve her, but she knows that it's a sign of attention and affection. More than that, it's just very fucking hot. He looks into her eyes as he pushes in, in, in, and God, she's maybe oversensitive and she feels herself flutter around him, but he feels so *good*. Hair of the dog that bit you and all that, she thinks, as she tips her head back and he follows her, kisses her cheek; she gets one hand in his hair, the other around his bicep.

He bottoms out, pulls back slowly, starts a rhythm while they trade kisses back and forth. It's not urgent at all, despite the fact that she can feel his cock twitching inside her, bare and deep. It's *intimate*. He watches her, tracks her reaction when she feels her brows furrow as he finds that spot inside her (the one he'd bullied a little on round three, she remembers that vividly: his hand pressing down on her

lower stomach while the curve of his cock inside her made her shiver) and doubles down on the friction.

“That’s it,” Jack murmurs. “Think you can come like this?”

She considers it for a split second before she nods and kisses him.

It’s a slow climb to her peak, heady and sweet. He doesn’t touch her clit and she doesn’t need to, either. The feeling of him so deep inside her, filling her up so well, plus the soft praise he delivers right into her mouth, has her there in a few minutes. She shudders and leans forward to kiss him through her release, spine-melting as it is.

He asks a question with his face, one he doesn’t have to verbalize. He’s close: her favorite tell of his is the way his hand tightens on her, trying to keep her right where she is. She nods, strokes over the back of his neck and tells him, “Give it to me.”

There’s a fluttering of his eyes for just a second before he opens them up again, a rush of warmth, a soft groan against her cheek. His nose bumps against hers as he drags his lips to hers again, pressing mellow, soft kisses there, ones she easily gets lost in for minutes. He softens and slips out of her, but they still lie there with their limbs tangled together for a long time.

Eventually, she starts to feel more sweaty than afterglow and Jack suggests they have fancy Nespresso coffee to get prepared for their very last day of wedding festivities. She burrows under the covers, still too lazy to get up, while he heads to the bathroom to clean up just a little before heading to the living room.

“Who was it?”

“Hm?” he says, loudly enough that she can hear him from the living room.

“The phone call earlier.”

“Robby again. Probably still wondering on Shen’s behalf if I’m coming back to nights soon. For a guy who’s so ‘chill’,” she can hear the air quotes without seeing them, “he’s pretty needy.”

“Really?”

“Really. Hey, what’s — is this —”

His fingers are curled around the handle of the travel mug she'd bought yesterday, pushed out into the arch between the living room and the bedroom so she can see it.

"Forgot about that. It's for you."

He pops his head out, then. "For me?"

"Yeah, Jack."

"How'd you know my rank?"

She sits up to better watch his reaction. "Lucky guess."

He grins and chuckles.

They slip on the bare minimum of clothes — he pulls on his briefs, she wears her underwear from last night and his pajama shirt — so they can sit on the patio with their coffee. The conversation's easy and light. They cover Shen's quirks (the way to his heart is through horribly sweet Dunkin'), Dunkin' (there's *nothing wrong* with it, she has to insist, she's from Boston after all), that coffee shop around the corner from the Pitt (single-origin beans, Samira!), the wine bar around the corner from the Pitt (the marinated olives are fine, the mushroom toast sucks), mushrooms (they both unequivocally love them), what other foods they like (he likes any kind and any style of pizza, she'll always go for seafood), what the dinner options are at the reception (fish, chicken or vegan, she'd picked fish and had hoped chicken would work for whoever her date would end up being, yes, it does).

They finally arrive at the question of what her plan was if Jack didn't offer to go with her, and she tries to hide the involuntary grimace that crosses her face with a hand covering her mouth. He taps around the jut of her ankle; she'd brushed her foot up his shin, liking the resumption of the skin-on-skin contact, until he brought it up into his lap.

"I was thinking about skipping the whole thing," Samira answers, shrugging. "I might still want to skip the ceremony later."

"Hm," Jack says.

She raises an eyebrow at his seemingly incomplete response.

"Well," he says, without further verbal prompting, "do you want to

skip the ceremony later?”

She sort of does, she sort of doesn't. The mental image she has of watching Kashi walk down the aisle is equally sinister and fascinating, like one of those spooky videos with a jumpscare attached to a chain email from middle school that says *send to five friends OR ELSE* and you watch the video anyway and it gives you nightmares for a couple days. (She really hadn't been having a good time in eighth grade for a few different reasons.)

“Do you want to skip the ceremony later?” she asks him to buy herself more time.

Jack turns his mug in his free hand so he can read the lettering on it for, like, the fifth time, and Samira feels her heart do a weird shimmy in her chest. “Not really. I kind of had this idea about some big scene, to make sure Kashi knows not to mess with you anymore.”

“Some big scene,” Samira repeats.

“Like in *My Best Friend's Wedding*.”

She tries to wrack her brain for what scene he could possibly be talking about. She's seen that movie more times than she can count — there's always something to be said for a protagonist who's sort of a batshit workaholic — but nothing's coming to mind. “When did you see that?”

“I didn't,” he replies. “After you went to bed, I did some Googling, I read through a synopsis, I analyzed the plot and tried to come up with a practical way to replicate it in a way that benefitted you.”

“You created a case report,” she says slowly, “of a rom-com.”

“Not — not exactly.” His face looks a little like it had yesterday when he admitted that he'd told Kashi and co. he wanted to propose to her, sort of self-conscious. He's apparently okay with being very into her, but when she catches onto the specific ways he shows it, he gets pink in his cheeks. “I just thought it'd be good. To have some prior knowledge, evaluate our options.”

“You created a case report of a rom-com for me,” Samira says as she clumsily sets her own mug down on the table, scrambles to get up and sits in Jack's lap, his thigh strong underneath her and his hands steadying her while he gives a soft *oof* at the suddenness of it all. “I hope you're not implying I'm Julia Roberts in that because she's

horrible and Cameron Diaz beat her up in the bathroom and I don't really think of Hayden as a Dermot Mulroney type —"

"I was really tired," he says as he slides a hand up the hem of her (his) shirt and squeezes her waist.

"You were close," she tells him, leaning in to kiss his forehead. And then, it's out of her mouth before she can stop it, "Are *you* sore?"

Samira could really, really get used to him blushing.

*

"Jack."

Nothing.

"Jack."

Nothing, again.

"John Aidan."

Still nothing. (She'd asked what his middle name was while she was riding him slowly. It felt weird, to know so much about him and so little. He'd laughed, a little pained, then told her.)

"Dr. Abbot."

He startles then, jolts back awake. She has to wonder how often he sleeps alone or in the on-call room if his title is the only thing he responds to. The view of the strong line of his back in the strong, bright sunlight makes her consider letting him lie on his Steelers towel like this a little longer, but, "Turn over."

He rubs at his eyes as he flips onto his back, settling one sandy hand on his stomach; the other goes to wipe away the sweat on his brow. "Re-set the timer for me?"

"Magic word," she says.

He replies, "I'm an Irish ginger, please help me."

One eye winks open, seeking hers, but she's already there, elbows propped on her knees and her head in her free hand so she can look down at him better. He'd been very clear about his routine for the beach when she'd pulled the sunscreen out of their shared tote bag

and tried to (sexily, daintily) put it on him: he *will* burn and he needed to be *slathered* in the good stuff. No, he does not want to get an umbrella; yes, he is sure that he wants to lay out and attempt to read a copy of a Grisham novel he'd picked up at Hudson News. Naturally, he'd fallen asleep with the paperback laid over his face.

"Hey," Jack says.

"Hi. Hungry?"

"What if I was?"

"Then I'd ask the waiter to come over and we'd get you an expensive pan bagnat or something."

Jack makes a slightly stunned noise. "They have beachside waiters?"

"Yeah. One of them came over while you were out. I got a blueberry G&T." She holds the sweating glass up for his inspection, then actually offers it to him. He sits up just enough to take a sip from the straw, mouths gratitude her way then splays out again. It reminds her of the last time they'd been side-by-side in Trauma 1, when she'd reached out a hand in his direction and he'd handed her a pair of forceps. It really was that easy, that seamless.

His brow crinkles, and he repeats, "They have beachside waiters?"

"Yeah, I told him he should come back in a while to get our food orders."

"When's Ravi's graduation again?"

Samira thinks. "Next year. He's on track to graduate early."

"You should try to convince him to have his graduation party here. I *like* it."

She laughs a little, and he turns his head toward her. "What?" he asks, hazel eyes roaming over her, hands drumming over his stomach in a way she finds *very* enticing before he sits up fully and faces her.

"You're gonna be with me next year for that?"

"Samira," Jack says, getting her attention focused on his face again. "I really like you. I want to date you, and I want to be your date to everything. Especially if it's at places like *this*."

She tries to imagine how she'd have felt on Friday or Saturday without him, had she chosen to attend all this alone, but she *knows* that feeling: embarrassment mixed with shame, regret, irritation and frustration all rolled into one. It's a familiar thing that churns its way through her gut whenever she has to prove herself. Med school, every family vacation that included Kashi, high school band class, all of it, that same feeling in varying degrees.

The past few days have felt ... okay, actually, in between the stupid bridesmaids and boyfriends and everything. He's been there to reassure her constantly; he knows when to stand back and let her deal with it, and he knows when to step in and stand up for her. And as stressful as the ER can be, she doesn't feel it when he's around; she's starting to recognize it too, here, outside of work. That she feels *good* around him. Comfortable, relaxed. Challenged a little, yes, but in a good way. He's *good*. Kind, like Aunt Riya said, but with a mischievous and snarky streak that means he's not totally boring. He's smart and funny and horribly competent, and he's excellent in bed.

And, what's most exceptional: he fits. He gets it. He understands how terrible their schedules are; how sometimes she leaves ready to take on the world and other times she leaves wanting to curl into bed until her next shift. He checks in on her, tells her to go home, and sometimes he's the one to remind her to eat. He cares.

He'd come to *this* with her, hadn't he?

"Please don't make me invite myself to Mohan family Thanksgiving dinner," Jack says, a faint, sort of distressed smile crossing his face. It's a little more of a grimace. While she's been thinking, gathering all the information she could about how she feels and how she feels about a relationship with him, he's been waiting for her. Patiently. Like he had for an unbelievable *year* before this.

(Well, at least she'll be back to Slow-Mo. Spinster probably doesn't apply anymore.)

"I think Ravi will probably invite you on his own," she replies, voice breaking around another laugh. "But, yes. Yeah. You can come to Mohan family Thanksgiving dinner."

"As your ..." He's tentative. Hopeful.

They've already been pretending, and they'd already had the label talk, sort of, so she smiles and says firmly, "Boyfriend."

Jack's face breaks into the same sort of giddy grin he'd had when they were tipsy last night. He leans up to kiss her. "And the age difference, the fact that we work together, my wounded vet status —"

"Please don't call yourself that, you're more than —"

"My leg, my ongoing relationship with a very good therapist who specializes in military trauma, the fact that I hang out on the roof —"

"I've been meaning to ask about that," she says, making a mental note to bring up what exactly he does up there with Dr. Robby later, when his thumbs aren't curving around her knees distractingly.

"None of that gives you pause? Makes you think what other people are gonna say?"

"Jack, my entire family with the exception of the most evil person I know *loves* you, and they know all that. And I don't care, either." They should tell Dr. Robby at some point, though that conversation will be brutal, and, God, Santos is going to be so annoying, but it's not like it'll change their relationship on the floor at all. "I'm more concerned about the fact that our kids are probably going to need SPF 100 all the time."

Jack smirks. "Our *kids*, huh?"

"*You* said yesterday that you wanted to propose to me!"

"How many kids are you thin—"

She shuts him up with another kiss.

*

They stay there, eating slices of beach pizza and sharing another blueberry G&T, for as long as they can before they have to head back to their room to get ready for the ceremony. Jack looks more eager than strictly necessary when she asks for his help with her dress and more dejected than she could've imagined when she shows him that it has a zipper, not halter ties. She cheers him up by tying his tie for him, loving the way he walks her through it: "very good for your first time performing this procedure, Dr. Mohan," he says in the exact same tone of voice she's used to hearing in the Pitt, but now he pairs it with a squeeze of his hand around her waist. Jack holds her hand all the way from the elevator to the beach, then shifts to settle the same hand against the small of her back, warm even through the cool silk of her

dress, as they take two seats on the left side of the aisle.

“Nice decor,” Jack says and tilts his chin towards the ocean and the sun, low in the sky. There’s a big archway made up of roses and twinkling lights behind where the happy couple will stand, rose-gold draping inside the hotel windows that look out onto the beach.

Even Samira has to admit that it’s beautiful. “Very ... classy.”

He wraps his arm around the back of her chair. “Very polite of you.” And, lower, in her ear, “There’s still time to make a big scene, if you want to.”

She snorts a little unattractively, though he seems to find it alright since he laughs too. “What do you suggest?”

“Could say you object to the union,” Jack says drily, his stubble tickling the side of her face. “Then I’d have to object to the objection, and we’d never get out of here.”

“You’re terrible,” she replies, holding back a laugh. “That’s too much of a scene. How about I do something at the reception, like we steal the first dance?”

“You could also interrupt someone’s speech, say some horrible things about the bride.”

“Kashi would fight me.”

Jack raises his eyebrows. “Would she win?”

Samira laughs again. “God, no. She wouldn’t want to break a nail.”

He grins. “Atta girl.”

Instrumental music plays as Grant and Francesca walk first, then Daniel and Whitney, then Hayden. He waits at the front for a bit, then the *dun-dun-da-dun* starts, they’re all obliged to stand and turn to watch Kashi and Uncle Jay walk down the aisle.

“Nice dress,” Jack whispers in her ear.

Shit. It is a nice dress. Kashi looks radiant; her hair, makeup and jewelry are perfectly matched to the strapless mermaid gown. It’s a perfectly simple look, simpler than Samira would have given her cousin credit for.

Hayden's uncle officiates, his voice smooth and loud. When he asks if there's anything that should prevent this man and this woman from marrying, Jack squeezes her shoulder and gives her a sly little smirk that she returns. Hayden and Kashi wrote their own vows; Hayden pulls a neat little folded square of paper from his pocket, but Kashi delivers hers from memory (Samira stops herself from rolling her eyes). They exchange rings and kiss with the look of two people who are In Love.

It's very, very romantic. Samira can't find it in herself to really hate any part of it, not when Jack's eyes are so warm when they find hers.

The reception is held in the hotel's ballroom, which is decked out with more roses. Their final time together as a group has Samira and Jack sitting together at the table with the rest of their side. Uncle Jay is still crying. Indy has this gigantic, uncharacteristic smile on his face, and Samira realizes belatedly that he's gotten cozy with the bartender and is already on his third glass of wine as their appetizers arrive. Ravi decides to get cozy with Jack, who gives Samira a very gratified glance before launching into a ER story. That leaves Samira to talk to a very pleased Aunt Riya, who's happy that Kashi found someone who loves her in her entirety and who says the same to Samira with a bright, knowing smile on her face.

Yeah, Samira thinks as she catches Jack's eye, his gaze warm and steady, the quirk of his lips familiar, not a single thought of beating Kashi in her mind, *yeah, I found him*.

Chapter End Notes

That's all, folks! Thank you, thank you, **thank you** for all your patience, support, comments, kudos and bookmarks throughout this series. I had such a blast writing this and I love knowing that many of you enjoyed it.

(For those wondering, Robby keeps calling Jack because Heather's pregnant again — yay for them! Robby's newfound happiness makes every suspicious, and that occupies the rest of the Pitt staff for a good while — yay for Samira and Jack!)

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